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National
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International Issues Review

29 June 1979

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Terrorist Links in Latin America: Post-Mortem On The JCR [redacted] 3.5(c)

The Junta de Coordinacion Revolucionaria (known as JCR or the Junta) represents one of the most ambitious attempts by terrorist groups over the last decade to form an effective international terrorist network. Founded in Argentina in 1974 by terrorist leaders from Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Argentina, the JCR opened its membership to guerrilla and terrorist formations that were "Marxist-Leninist" in orientation, agreed to form a "revolutionary army," and accepted the "socialist" nature of the revolution. At first the JCR seemed a formidable threat to several governments in Latin America, particularly in view of Cuba's initial interest and conditional support. The potential threat increased as the JCR contacted revolutionary groups elsewhere in Latin America and even in Western Europe. However, the intensive counterterrorist campaign in Argentina and other Southern Cone countries effectively curbed the armed activities of those terrorist groups that formed the base of the JCR. With little room for maneuver in Latin America, the JCR turned largely to propaganda efforts directed at Latin American exiles. The organization's recent lack of initiative, even in propaganda, indicates its strength is greatly diminished, its influence almost negligible, and its future quite dim. Its failure has some implications for efforts at collaboration by terrorist groups elsewhere. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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The JCR Today: A Paper Tiger

The JCR is moribund, though on paper it still looks impressive. Had it retained all the staff it ever recruited, all the international contacts it ever made, and all the terrorists theoretically responding to its direction or receiving its aid, it would have become a "Terrorist International" for Latin America. US military

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estimates of September 1978 noted that about 200 JCR activists had been "identified." Two hundred full-time terrorists can do much damage; for comparative purposes, the current active service units of the Provisional Irish Republican Army probably total less than that number.

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The JCR still has an internal structure of a kind--including a leader in Europe, Federico Chavez, married to the sister of the late Ernesto "Che" Guevara of Cuba, and at least eight other officials, most of whom, like Chavez, are living in Paris. At one time or another it had contacts with at least 20 revolutionary organizations in Latin America with memberships totaling in the thousands and nearly as many other groups in Western Europe, the Middle East, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Cuban and Soviet intelligence officers reportedly stay in touch with it (presumably for weightier reasons than merely ensuring the welfare of Che Guevara's sister).

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In Paris the JCR occasionally publishes a journal called Che Guevara, and maintains an anti-Argentine regime propaganda center, the Centre Argentina de Informacion y Solidaridad (CAIS). The Agencia de Prensa America Latina (PRELA) in Caracas functions as another JCR propaganda outlet. Through such instruments, the JCR has tried to influence not only disaffected Latin Americans but international human rights investigators from Amnesty International, the UN Human Rights Commission, and even members of US Congressional committees. For more than a year, however, no new evidence has come to light that it sponsors training, directs terrorist or revolutionary activities, spends money to support terrorists, or even sends observers to revolutionary events that may be under way. It has been conspicious by its absence during the latest Sandinista offensive in Nicaragua, though some reporting indicates that a handful of JCR activists in Costa Rica may have played a minor role in helping Cuba gain Latin American support for the earlier Sandinista offensive. At present, therefore, the JCR is hardly more than a nuisance.

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When the Threat Seemed Real

The JCR was formed in February 1974 at a clandestine meeting in Argentina by terrorist leaders from Argentina's People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), Uruguay's Tupamaros, Chile's Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), and Bolivia's National Liberation Army (ELN). Mario Santucho of the ERP was the driving spirit in establishing the body. For the first two years his ERP provided most of the money and other logistical support for JCR activites. He also served as the main JCR contact with the Cuban Government. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Cuba apparently encouraged formation of the Junta (although the idea probably originated with Santucho), and at least for the first two years supplemented the ERP contributions with some monetary support as well as a promise of training assistance. Havana probably considered that the JCR could be of some use in influencing the ideological direction of Latin American revolutionaries; that it could serve as a surrogate instrument for subverting what Havana regarded as "reactionary" regimes without greatly jeopardizing Cuba's state-to-state relations elsewhere; and that it could run the risk of failure without making it appear to be Cuba's failure. [redacted] 3.5(c) [redacted] 3.5(c)

The JCR's early months showed several accomplishments. It seems to be well financed, with an income of more than $30 million during the period 1974 to 1976, and access to sources of additional funds from kidnapings, bank robberies and, reportedly, two narcotics networks. It attracted other terrorist groups as affiliates, notably from Paraguay (National Liberation Front--Frepalina), Argentina (Montoneros), Peru (Movement of the Revolutionary Left--MIR), Guatemala (Revolutionary Armed Forces of National Liberation--FALN), Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces--FARC), and Nicaragua (the Sandinista). Its representatives fanned out to Paris, Lisbon, Frankfurt, Rome, Stockholm, and elsewhere to establish contact with additional terrorist groups, with local Communist parties, and with any other organization willing to provide material or moral support. It established a system for providing safehouses and false documentation. It set up a guerrilla training base in Argentina, complete with

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airstrip, and arranged for other guerrillas to receive training in Cuba, East Germany, and various Palestinian training bases. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The governments of the so-called Southern Cone countries reacted decisively to this perceived "international" threat, including a cooperative effort dubbed "Operation Condor." Between October 1975 and May 1977 security forces overran the Argentinian training base, killing Santucho, decimated the four founding terrorist groups, and thwarted every terrorist operation in Latin America bearing the signature of JCR. Some of these operations were near misses, such as the plot to assassinate Paraguayan President Stroessner in December 1975. Indeed, a JCR-sponsored plot in Paris to kill the Bolivian Ambassador to France in May 1976 was successful. Other operations, however, were caught at such an early stage that they seem in retrospect to have been badly conceived--notably "Operation Red Boomerang," which involved the invasion of Chile by 140 guerrillas on horseback. Indeed, the security forces seem to have had little trouble in penetrating the JCR and thereby countering operations almost as soon as they had been conceived. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The last known terrorist operations that may have included significant involvement by the JCR occurred in April 1977 in Western Europe. One was an unsuccessful attempt to kidnap a former Swedish Government minister in order to gain the release of Baader-Meinhof Gang members imprisoned in West Germany. The other occurred when the director-general of Fiat-France was kidnaped and ransomed for $2 million; the Swiss police recovered more than three-fourths of the ransom. Present or former members of the Tupamaros, Montoneros, and the ERP participated in this bizarre episode. [redacted] 3.5(c)

During 1978 terrorist groups loosely affiliated with the JCR attacked Nicaraguan consulates and airline offices in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Colombia. While this represented a significant gesture of sympathy for the Sandinista by other Latin American terrorists, it was not, as far as can be determined, a JCR-sponsored operation. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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Why the Failure?

By 1978, what was left of the JCR itself was thus reduced to a European-based publishing enterprise serving a continually decreasing readership. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The failure of the JCR to remain an effective terrorist threat can be accounted for by both particular and general factors. Santucho's death in 1976 clearly was one blow from which the JCR never recovered; his particular leadership skills proved to be irreplaceable. This situation has parallels in other terrorist organizations. Since terrorism requires the use of small units to commit spectacular incidents, an individual's personal qualities often play a decisive role in the ultimate success or failure of the entire organization. When the opposing security forces succeed in putting a few key terrorists out of action, the results can thus be significant. For example, the deaths of two important Belfast IRA leaders at the hands of the British Army in 1972 and 1973 (Joe McCann, believed to have assassinated 15 British soldiers, and Jimmy Bryson, a particularly resourceful IRA battalion commander) weakened the capabilities and apparently the resolve of the IRA to engage British forces directly in Belfast, though not elsewhere in Northern Ireland. The recent passivity of the international terrorist "Carlos"--Ilich Ramirez Sanchez*--has coincided with a worldwide decline in the complex multicountry terrorist "spectaculars" for which he has shown a special flair. Santucho, like McCann, Bryson, and Carlos, was a special type, and his also was a special loss. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Other factors, however, clearly affected the JCR as well. Even before his demise, Santucho admitted to his associates that the JCR had failed. In addition to external pressures from governmental security forces, the JCR had been weakened internally by factionalism. The four founding groups never bore equal burdens, and Santucho's group (ERP) grew tired of supporting the other three, which were weaker. Moreover, when the Montoneros applied for membership they were not given a position on

*Carlos is a Venezuelan-born operative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was involved in several sensational terrorist attacks in the past.

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the ruling secretariat. Their second-class status was a reflection of their previous rivalry with the ERP in Argentina. Once the Montoneros had been relegated to a secondary position, no other group joining the JCR could be raised to the same level as the original four. The stage was set for bickering and mutual rather than effective collaboration. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The Cuban relationship to the JCR proved another source of the organization's decline. Some affiliates feared Cuban domination, and JCR efforts to show distance from Havana reduced Castro's interest in providing support. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The factional, ideological, and ultimately nationalistic differences which contributed to the JCR's demise tend to inhibit the creation of any effective international network of terrorist groups. Coordination of terrorist groups tends to work best on an ad hoc, essentially bilateral basis. In any event, such coordination tends to be less important than the relationship of the terrorist group to a patron state or some internal popular base of support. When the number of terrorist groups involved in coordination, or the number of target countries is greater than two, the situation becomes unwieldy and unworkable. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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